

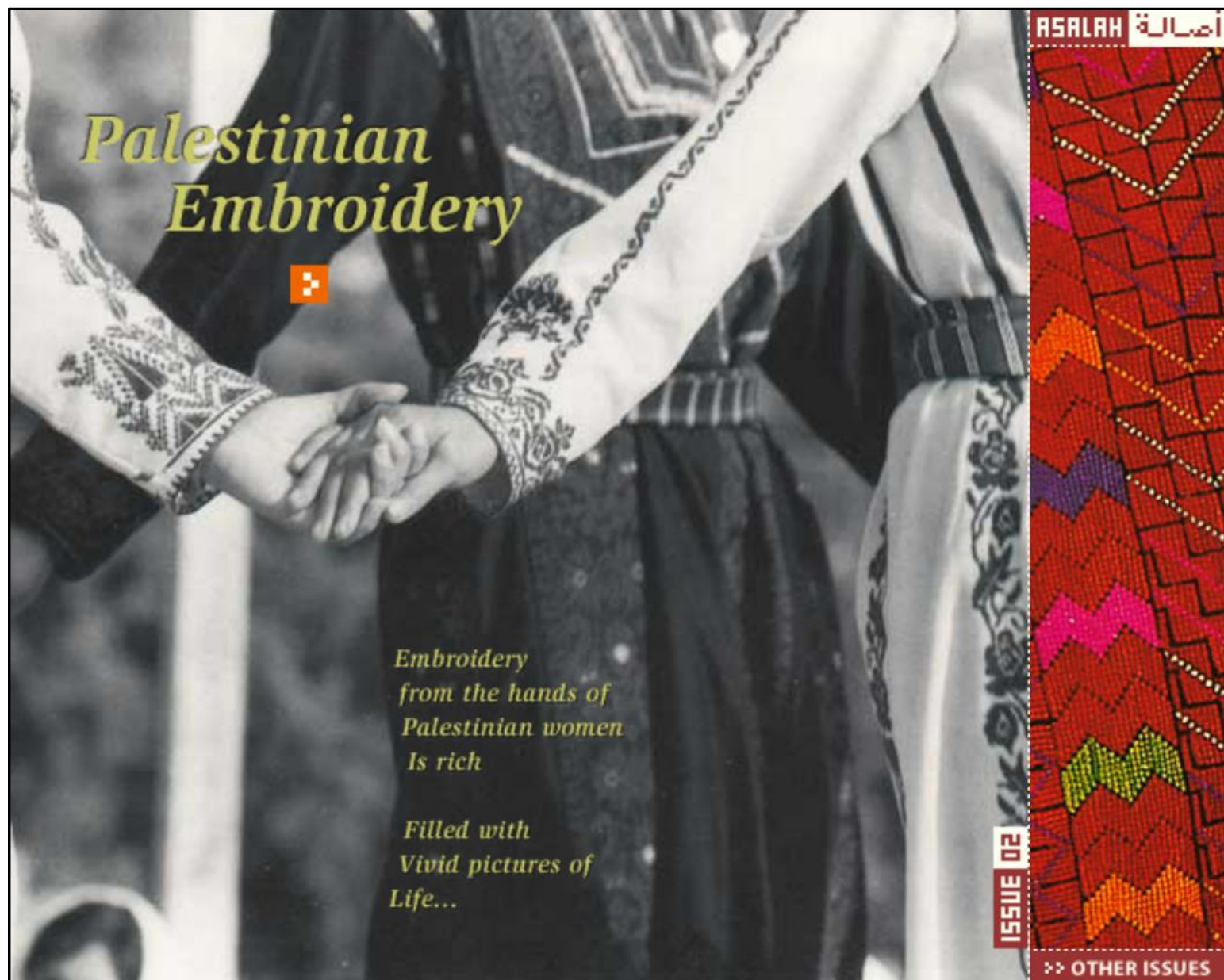
Palestinian Embroidery


Once a traditional craft practiced by village women, Palestinian embroidery has become an important symbol of Palestinian culture.

USAID

Asalah Magazine

Issue 2, September 2002





*By the light of an oil-burning lantern
A Palestinian woman toils over her dress*

*A dress that dances
with the motion of her hands,
and carries with it
the scent of the earth.*



**1 EMBROIDERY IN
PALESTINIAN CULTURE**

**2 CROSS-STITCH
EMBROIDERY**

3 THE THOUB

4 REGIONAL STYLES

5 COLORS

6 PATTERNS

**7 PALESTINIAN
EMBROIDERY NOW**

8 FOR OUR MOTHERS

EMBROIDERY IN PALESTINIAN CULTURE



Once a traditional craft practiced by village women, Palestinian embroidery has become an important symbol of Palestinian culture. Embroidered pieces can be found in the homes of most Palestinian families in the West Bank, Gaza and beyond - adorning homes in Bethlehem, cement block houses in Gaza, villas in the Gulf and suburban split-levels in the United States. Cross-stitch embroidery is given as gifts and worn by Palestinians worldwide on special occasions.



The popularity of embroidery springs both from its beauty and its association with Palestinian culture and history. Embroidery patterns are derived from sources as diverse as ancient mythology and British colonization, and date back as far the Canaanites who lived in the region more than 3,000 years ago.



Traditionally, embroidery was the principal decoration of rural Palestinian women's clothing. It was part of a village woman's daily routine and a means of showing off her personal skills and social identity. The various colors, patterns and styles of dress reflected a woman's social standing, marital status and wealth.

Although the Palestinian cultural landscape has changed dramatically in the past fifty years, cross-stitch embroidery remains a vibrant handicraft because for many Palestinians it is a familiar reminder of the lives of their grandparents and great-grandparents.

PALESTINIAN CROSS-STITCH EMBROIDERY



Cross-stitch embroidery is an ancient and universal art, found throughout Europe and the Middle East. Representations of women wearing embroidered tunics were found in excavations in Jericho, the oldest known continuously inhabited town in the world.

In historic Palestine, cross-stitch embroidery was considered a basic skill that all girls should have. Since formal education wasn't available to village girls until the 1940's, embroidery was one of the areas in which a young girl could excel. In the words of Im Ibrahim, « *In the past, girls who didn't know how to embroider were considered like girls who don't know how to read today!* ».

Girls were taught to embroider by their mothers, usually between the ages of 10 and 12. Najlah, now in her 80's, says: « *It was my sister who taught me. She said, "You should be ashamed of yourself that you don't embroider". So I learned!* ». The neatness and creativity of a girl's embroidery had a major effect on her social standing within the community.

Embroidering was a highly communal activity - one that allowed women to socialize as they worked. Aisha, 63, remembers: « *After our mothers finished their work and ate, they would sit together as a group and embroider.* ».



THE THOUB



What is a *thoub*? A *thoub* (pronounced thaa-wb) is the traditional Palestinian dress, full and with long sleeves, characterized by colorful embroidery on the chest, arm, or hem areas. Modern *thoubs* are said to be a mix of Roman, Greek, Coptic, Byzantine and Arab styles - all cultures which, at some time, predominated in historic Palestine.

The *thoub* was worn both in daily life and on special occasions. The embroidered *thoub* acted as a guide to a woman's personal skills, financial status and local identity. For centuries, the *thoub* was the only socially accepted outfit for a village woman to wear in public, for it combined the freedom needed for labor with enough covering to ensure modesty.

The *thoub* had to be hardworking enough to stand up to the hard physical labor of agricultural life. In the words of Im Ahmed:

« *Before, I had a thoub for every day. I would work on the land, cook bread, look after the goats, harvest the grapes. Every occasion had a thoub - harvesting corn and wheat, picking the grapes...* »

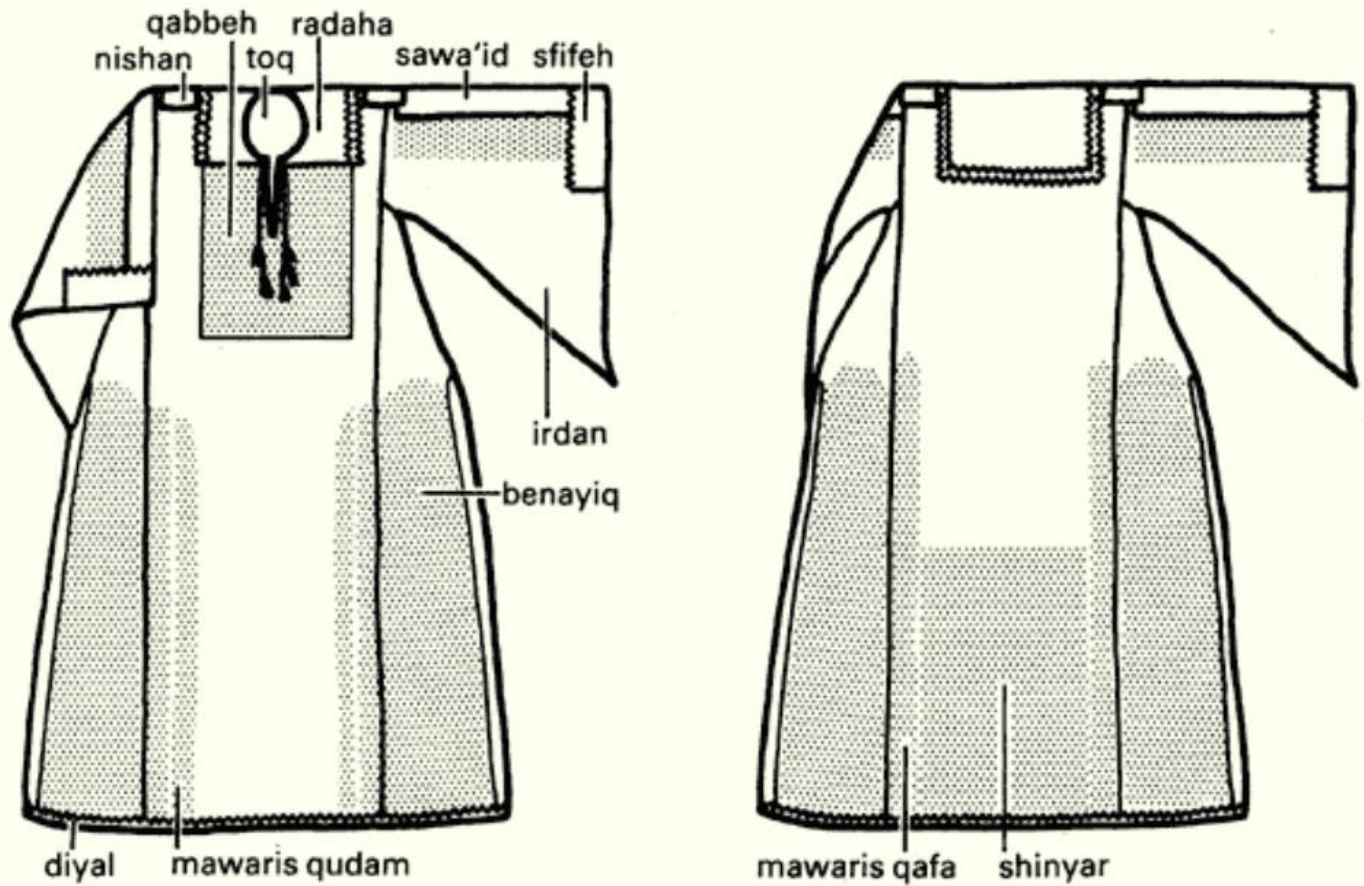


The most noteworthy aspect of a *thoub* was not its durability, however, but the large blocks of intricate embroidery located on the chest, sides, sleeves, and front or back hem. The central patterns were found on the chest panel, which is said to protect the vulnerable chest area from the evil eye, bad luck and illness.



Although everyday *thoubs* were work clothes, every woman had to have at least one special *thoub* to wear for occasions - funerals, weddings and visits to the city. Among Bedouin women of the Negev, a woman's newest *thoub* was known as the "*thoub ad-dis*" - the "*hideaway dress*" because it was taken out of storage only for special occasions. The next-best *thoub* was worn for entertaining guests, and so the order continued, with the oldest *thoub* reserved for everyday menial work.

Women would embroider *thoub* panels separately, piecing them together with sections of silk or linen once all the sections were complete. « *We would embroider the pieces and then give them to my uncle who would sew them together* », reminisces Im Ibrahim.



Thoubs could have over 20 sections, depending on the regional style. The Bethlehem dress was the most complex with 25 pieces, the Ramallah dress had 21 pieces, and the simple Gaza dress usually just 14 pieces.

REGIONAL STYLES OF EMBROIDERY



Traditional Palestinian embroidery can be said to have six regional centers: Ramallah, Bethlehem, Jaffa, Hebron, Gaza and the Southern Plains. The embroidery of each region possessed distinctive qualities. Jaffa embroidery was famous for its delicate craftsmanship; Gaza, for its sparse decoration on striped cotton; Bethlehem, for its silver and gold couching.

Aisha, 63, remembers: « *If a woman came from Gaza to the West Bank it would be obvious right away that she was from Gaza, because of the color and design of her thoub.* ».

Over time, such fiercely unique regional - even village - styles evolved into a more general style which helped to define Palestinian culture as its own entity. To experience a "taste" of Palestinian regional styles as they once existed, choose one of the following:



RAMALLAH



BETHLEHEM



HEBRON

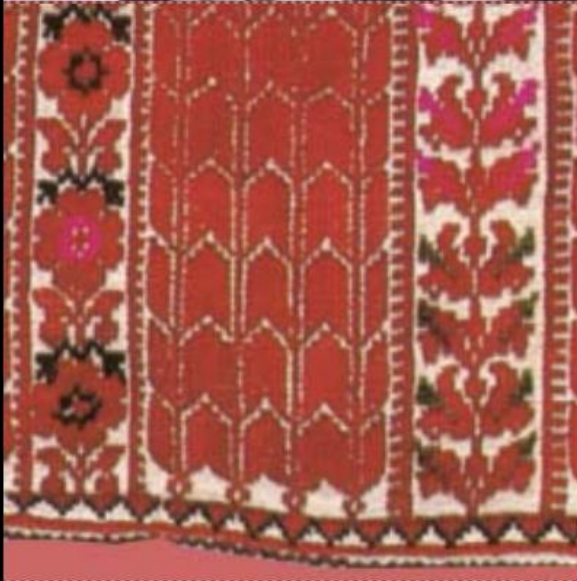


GAZA

BEDOUINS OF THE
SOUTHERN PLAINS

REGIONAL STYLES OF EMBROIDERY: RAMALLAH

[BETHLEHEM](#)
[HEBRON](#)
[GAZA](#)
[BEDOUINS OF THE SOUTHERN PLAINS](#)



For many years Ramallah was known by Palestinians as "the bride of summer resorts" since its mountains overlooked the Mediterranean Sea, giving a beautiful view and cool breezes during summer. The name Ramallah in Arabic means "the hills of God". It was so named since its citizens believed that God had guided them to go and live there, to farm its fertile lands filled with olive and fruit orchards.

Ramallah embroidery was called the "*Romieh*". Women embroidered on dresses of white linen for summer, and black linen for winter. Embroidery from Ramallah is distinctive for its threads of wine-red, and for delicate and precise cross-stitching.



[PREVIOUS](#)



[NEXT](#)

REGIONAL STYLES OF EMBROIDERY: BETHLEHEM

◻ RAMALLAH

◻ HEBRON

◻ GAZA

◻ BEDOUINS OF THE SOUTHERN PLAINS



During the 19th century, it became fashionable for women from all over Palestine to purchase the Bethlehem Royal Dress - or if that was not affordable, simply the chest panel. Thickly couched with silver and gold thread, this unique and beautiful *thoub* was worn on for a bride's wedding day and subsequent special days.

Unlike women in other regions, Bethlehem women were accustomed to selling their embroidered handiwork. For centuries, they worked in local cottage industries to meet the constant demand of Christian pilgrims for souvenirs from the Holy Land. As examples of their embroidery spread, the rich brocade-like fabrics and designs became a status symbol sought by all Palestinian women.



MASTERS OF THE CROSS-STITCH



Though the names of most "masters of the cross-stitch" have been lost to us, during their lives these women were not anonymous. Skilled embroideresses were admired and well-known within their communities. A few, the especially talented, were known throughout Palestine.

The exceptionally fine embroidery of Miriam Ibrahim Jadallah from Bethlehem, for example, was highly sought after. Imaginative as well as technically proficient, Jadallah introduced patterns - such as the bird motif - into Bethlehem embroidery.



REGIONAL STYLES OF EMBROIDERY: HEBRON

[RAMALLAH](#)
[BETHLEHEM](#)
[GAZA](#)
[BEDOUINS OF THE SOUTHERN PLAINS](#)


Famous for its grapes and vineyards, Hebron was also renowned for its talented craftsmen who worked in glass, ceramic and leather. The name "*Hebron*", "*Khalil*" in Arabic, is inspired by the name of the Muslim prophet, Khalil Arahman Ibrahim, who is buried in the mosque in Hebron.

The area of Hebron includes many villages such as Yatta, Dura, Halhoul and Beit Jibrin. All were renowned for their beautiful dresses, and dense, multi-colored embroidery.


[PREVIOUS](#)

[NEXT](#)

REGIONAL STYLES OF EMBROIDERY: GAZA

[RAMALLAH](#)
[BETHLEHEM](#)
[HEBRON](#)
[BEDOUINS OF THE SOUTHERN PLAINS](#)


Gaza, known for its green pastures and fertile soil, was an important commercial center due to its strategic location on the coast. It was also a meeting point for Muslim pilgrims on their way to Mecca.

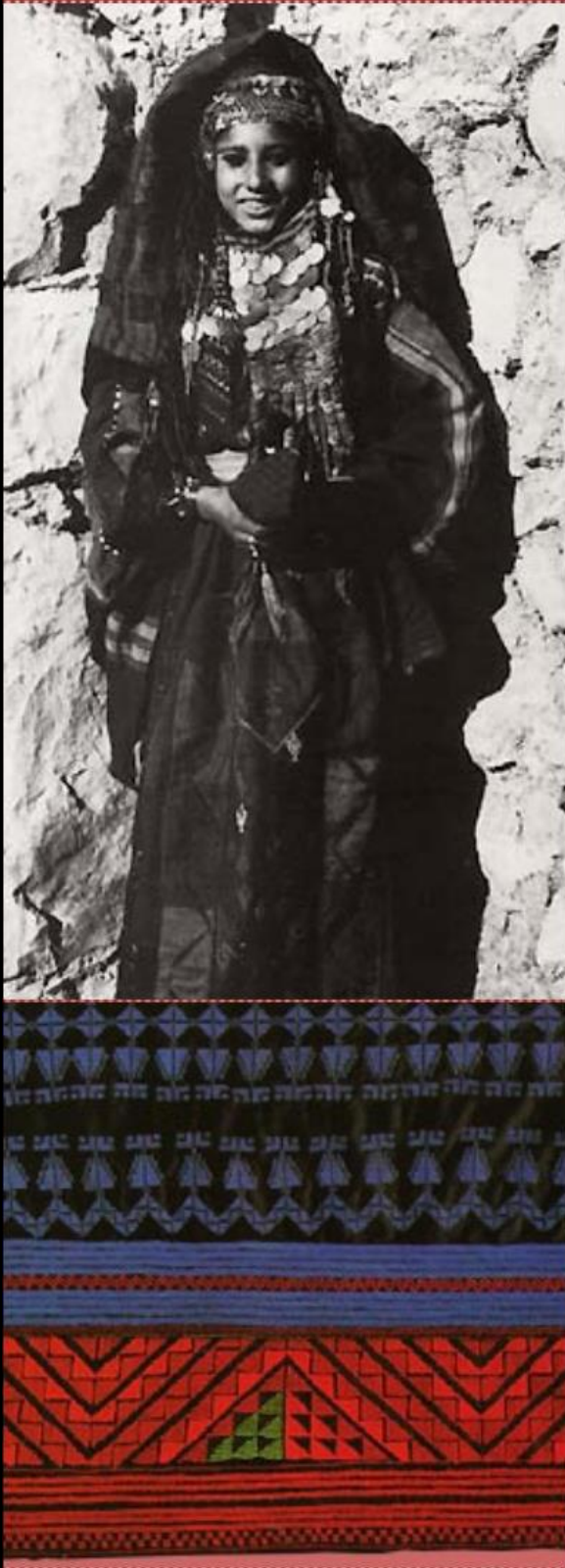
Gazan embroidery is often distinguished by large, geometric shapes in bright colors. Traditionally, the embroidery was sewn onto Majdal fabric, characterized by colored silk stripes. Gazan *thoubs* were strikingly simple - with embroidery mainly on the chestpiece.


[PREVIOUS](#)

[NEXT](#)

REGIONAL STYLES OF EMBROIDERY: BEDOUNS OF THE SOUTHERN PLAINS

[RAMALLAH](#)
[BETHLEHEM](#)
[HEBRON](#)
[GAZA](#)



The southern plains are a vast desert, dotted by a few precious, green oasis. The people living here were nomadic Bedouin clans who travelled to provide for the needs of their herds of sheep and camels.

Bedouin clans famous for their beautiful dresses include the clans of Atabaha, Aramadine, Abouj Midein, Al A'zazma and others. Their dresses were unique since they were always made of black cloth, and much larger in cut and volume than Palestinian dresses from other areas. Bedouin *thoubs* were also distinguished by embroidery found on the front hem of the dress.



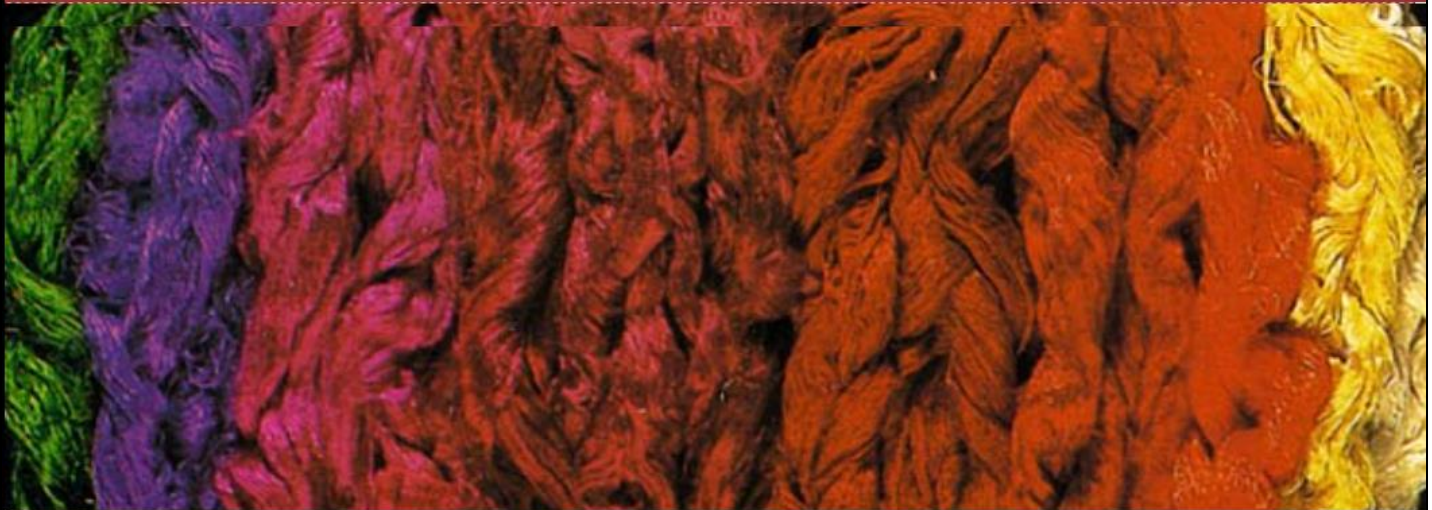
A Bedouin bride embroidered her dress with red threads, while a widow used only dark blue thread - the Bedouin color for mourning. A Bedouin widow ready to re-marry, however, would display her "on the market" status by embroidery in both red and blue.

[PREVIOUS](#)



[NEXT](#)

COLORS OF PALESTINIAN EMBROIDERY



Before the appearance of synthetically dyed threads, the colors used in Palestinian embroidery was dictated by the availability of natural dyes. Materials harvested from the earth yielded "reds" (mixing of insects and pomegranate); "dark blues" (indigo plant); "yellow" (saffron flowers, soil and vine leaves); "brown" (oak bark); and "purple" (crushed murex shells).



In testament to the longevity of traditional dyeing methods, threads more than a hundred years old, colored with natural ingredients, are still vivid - in contrast to modern threads which fade quickly.

The same colors were used throughout Palestinian embroidery, with the shade of color depending on local tradition. For example, the subdued burgundy hue of Ramallah embroidery became a sharp and intense red under the Gazan sky.



Even the most cursory survey of Palestinian embroidery makes evident the predominance of the color red - a color rife with symbolism in traditional Palestinian culture. Some interpret the color as a symbol of menstrual, virginal, blood. Certainly, if an unmarried Palestinian girl wore red it would have been tantamount to a public announcement of lost virginity. Other women believe the color red represented joy. Im Wahid... « *You see a woman wearing red and you know she is happy.* »

Im Wael... « *There should always be a boundary between unmarried girls and married women. The thoub is this boundary. If I'm not married, I can't wear red. I can be like married women in other ways: I can be neat and clean, and wear nice clothes with embroidery. But blue, never red! A married woman can wear blue if she wants... But a virgin can never wear red.* »

PATTERNS OF PALESTINIAN EMBROIDERY



Patterns can be considered the building blocks of Palestinian embroidery. Although color and pattern arrangements vary - sometimes greatly - by region, the patterns themselves are a repetition of a limited number of shapes: stars, trees, squares, flowers and triangles, among others.



Multiple names - and meanings - are tied to each pattern. For example, some researchers believe that the "eight point star" - famous in Bethlehem embroidery - is derived from a meeting between the moon and Astarte, the Canaanite goddess of fertility.



The "zigzag" pattern, found primarily in Bedouin and Gazan embroidery, is said to be the staircase Astarte descended to rescue her husband from the god of death.

However, Bedouin women tell a different story. For them, the zigzag pattern can be traced back to the pattern goats make when urinating!



The classic "S" pattern was also known as the "horse's head" or "leech".



Other pattern names echo things found in a rural woman's daily life: food - "seven eggs in a pan"; or, animals - "eyes of a cow". Other names are deliberately humorous, with either political or social commentary underneath. Two birds facing away from each other could be "a young woman and her mother in law", while two birds facing each other were referred to during the early 1980's as "Begin and Sadat".

And yet other motifs refer to millennia of foreign occupation: "pasha's tent" - a reference to Ottoman times; and "officer's badge" or "officers pips" to British Mandatory military uniforms.


For those "Asalah" readers who embroider, or who fancy themselves someday embroidering, following are a sampling of Palestinian embroidery patterns:



RAMALLAH



HEBRON




GAZA





SOUTHERN PLAINS


PALESTINIAN EMBROIDERY 12345678

PATTERNS OF PALESTINIAN EMBROIDERY: SAMPLES

 RAMALLAH

 HEBRON

 GAZA


 SOUTHERN PLAINS


12


12


12

12



 PREVIOUS



NEXT 

ASALAH أصالة

ISSUE 02

PATTERNS OF PALESTINIAN EMBROIDERY: SAMPLES

☐ RAMALLAH

1 2

☐ HEBRON

1 2

☐ GAZA

1 2

☐ SOUTHERN PLAINS

1 2



☐ PREVIOUS



☐ NEXT

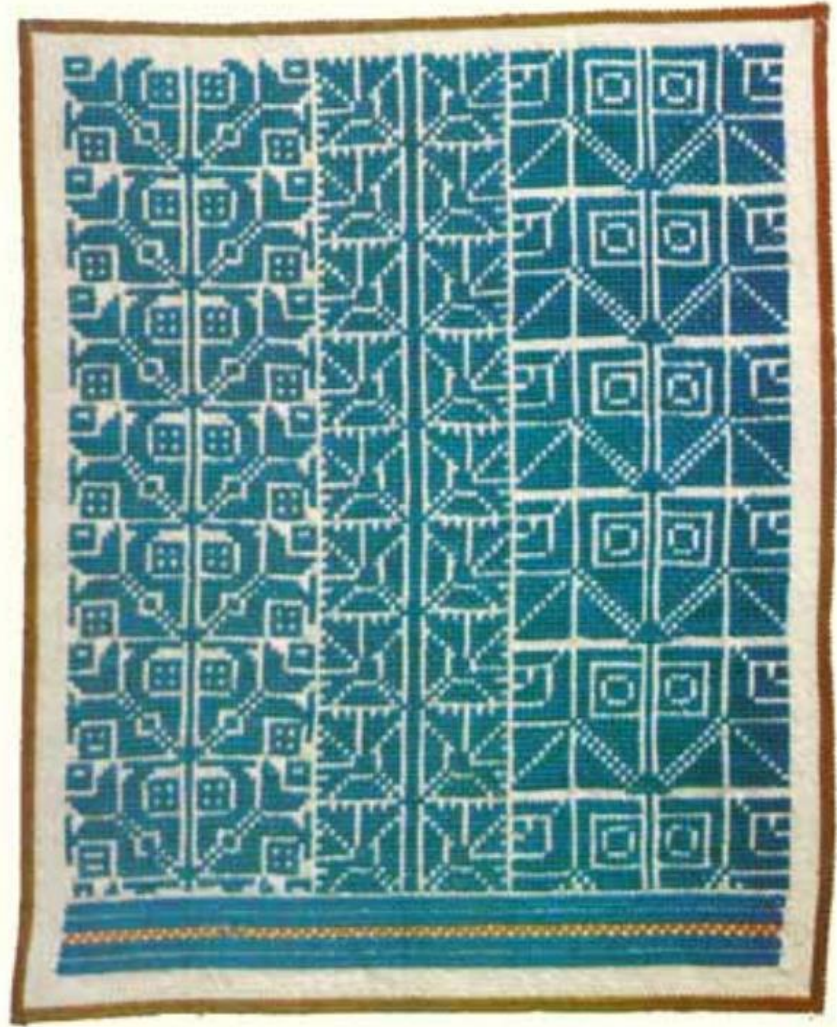
PATTERNS OF PALESTINIAN EMBROIDERY: SAMPLES

- [RAMALLAH](#) 1 2
- [HEBRON](#) 1 2
- [GAZA](#) 1 2
- [SOUTHERN PLAINS](#) 1 2

[PREVIOUS](#)[NEXT](#)

PATTERNS OF PALESTINIAN EMBROIDERY: SAMPLES

- [▶ RAMALLAH](#) [1](#) [2](#)
- [▶ HEBRON](#) [1](#) [2](#)
- [▶ GAZA](#) [1](#) [2](#)
- [▶ SOUTHERN PLAINS](#) [1](#) [2](#)

[◀ PREVIOUS](#)[▶ NEXT](#)

PALESTINIAN EMBROIDERY NOW



Although cross-stitch embroidery has been in decline in recent decades, Palestinian women have continued to embroider. Older women embroider because it's part of their life. Younger women embroider for women's cooperatives which were set up to preserve embroidery traditions and provide rural and refugee women with an income.

Embroidery styles changed, however, reflecting a blending together of varied traditions. Colors and patterns which, for centuries, were tied to regions - even specific villages - became mixed together. Embroidery survived, but it was transformed from a village handicraft into an artistic expression of Palestinian identity.

With contemporary Palestinian women preferring the "jilbab", an unadorned long dress, to the traditional embroidered *thoub*, Palestinian embroidery today finds different expression: in modern apparel, such as shawls, and in house decoration. Embroidered pillows, tablecloths, wall hangings and other home decorations - sold through Palestinian women's cooperatives - today are very popular.



Echoing the words of a young woman at a UNRWA embroidery cooperative in Gaza:

« We no longer embroider as our grandmothers did. That's true. Instead, we embroider for our homes - and for work... But no one can stop it. Embroidery is our heritage. We love it... and we are proud of it. »





With gratitude, to our mothers and grandmothers, for keeping Palestinian history alive...

❏ PREVIOUS



❏ CREDITS

The editors of "Asalah" gratefully acknowledge the important scholarship, both Palestinian and international, that has been done to document the artistry of traditional Palestinian embroidery.

Certainly, this issue of "Asalah" would not have been possible without borrowing heavily from the following:

Palestinian Costume by Shelagh Weir. Published by British Museum Press, 1994.

The National Palestinian Costume by Sherif Knaena, Omar Hamdan, Nabil El-Kham and Walid Rabeih. Published by the Arabic Studies Association, 1982.

Embroidering a Life: Palestinian Woman and Embroidery by Elizabeth Price. Produced by [Sunbula](#) in cooperation with the [Palestinian Heritage Center](#).